

**Note to chairs:**

Please read this background document and see if it helps the discussion. I have been reading the news in the past few days and noticed a few references to environmental migrants, or refugees. Personally, I think it's a good topic for our conference; it is current, it is suitable for discussion in the GA, and it is easy for delegates to write resolutions on this topic. Therefore, I gathered some definitions, historical facts, and links to current news articles, and then I organized them into a few paragraphs to help define the issue. I have also provided suggestions for possible resolution clauses and links that can be used by delegates in their own research on the topic.

The process of writing this paper took me several hours. I have been doing this type of research for years, so I don't expect each of you to produce a document as large as this one (although that would be nice!). But I hope you will produce similar summaries with references. You could work individually or in groups. Each summary, with supporting links, can be posted on a new page that you create. These documents are the written pieces that will be included in the conference handbook and posted on the conference wiki when the issues are published on September 22. Obviously, I welcome your comments on this document and will gladly change or add information based on those comments. Please post comments in the discussion section of this page.

## **Environmental Migrants, a Growing Concern for the UN**

### **Definition of terms and outline of the problem**

A refugee is a person who has a legitimate fear of persecution and who has fled from or fears returning to their country of origin. Asylum is shelter offered to refugees by a different government or nation. Repatriation is the safe return of refugees to their home country, while resettlement is the establishment by refugees of a new home in a new country. The country of first asylum is the country where refugees arrive when they flee. Sometimes refugees are resettled in a third country (neither their own country nor the country of first asylum). To deport a person means to send them out of a country with or without their consent. A government can deport a criminal (send them back to their home country). According to international law, however, it is not legal to deport a refugee. Finally, a more general term is also used in connection with refugees. A displaced person is any person who has fled their home for whatever reason. An earthquake, a civil war, poverty: these are just a few reasons why people leave their home. A displaced person may be classified as a refugee if he or she is in danger of persecution. However, a displaced person who has been forced to leave his or her home due to poor living conditions or a disaster is more commonly called a migrant.

Dealing with the problem of refugees can be divided into three stages. First, a displaced person has to be given refugee status. A government has to determine whether the displaced person deserves asylum as a refugee. This process takes some time and requires that the government conduct research into the person's background. If a person claims that he was tortured in his home country, research is needed to determine if this claim is true. Carrying out this research, and paying for it, is part of the work of the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR). Second, refugees must be

cared for in their country of first asylum and, eventually, resettled. Obviously, taking care of refugees requires a large amount of money. When the UNHCR was initially created in 1951, it was not required to fund the care of refugees. Its only job was to determine the legal status of a displaced person (refugee or not). However, today the UNHCR commands a budget of more than 1 billion USD and is considered one of the most important UN agencies. The third and final stage of solving the refugee problem is to eliminate the situation that is causing people to flee. Of course, this stage is vastly more complex than the first two stages. Eliminating the source of a refugee crisis can require changing the government of the home country or ending a civil war or ending a famine. In other words, the third stage usually takes a very long time and involves not only the UN and its many agencies but also the governments of several countries and, of course, the help of many non-governmental agencies.

### **The UN and Refugees: the Past and the Future.**

Following World War II, the United Nations helped resettle several million displaced persons in Europe. At that time, refugees were seen as a local problem in Europe. World leaders assumed that all of the refugees would be resettled or repatriated. In fact, the refugee crisis following World War II was solved successfully by the UN. However, a new refugee crisis quickly developed as nearly half a million eastern Europeans arrived in Western Europe during the late 1940s. At the same time, the United Nations were asked to help with the Palestinian refugees that resulted from the Arab-Israeli War in 1948. By 1950, it became clear to most of the member states that new refugee situations would continue to emerge. In response, the General Assembly in 1951 passed the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and created the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The Refugee Convention defined the rights of refugees and of the states that receive refugees. The UNHCR dedicates a section of its website to the 1951 Refugee Convention and the many additions to that convention: <http://www.unhcr.org/protect/3c0762ea4.html>. At the UNHCR website, it is possible to read the last five refugee reports. These are comprehensive summaries of the refugee situation and are released every few years by the UNHCR:

<http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/publ?id=3f098b4d4>

Nearly six decades have passed since the adoption of the 1951 Refugee Convention, and the problem of refugees has both increased and taken on many different forms. Military conflicts in all regions of the globe have resulted in many millions of refugees. Also, the countries where refugees arrived did not always willingly receive these refugees. In other cases, refugees did not even leave a country. Instead, they fled one region of a country in order to settle in a more favorable part of the same country. These refugees are known as internally displaced persons. In recent times, ever more factors cause people to be displaced from their homes, such as natural disasters, poor economic conditions, and poor environmental conditions. The rate of migration will only continue to grow, creating a big challenge for the UN, its agencies and member states.

Recent discussions among UN officials, NGOs, and government officials have been focusing on the many different types of human migrants. Should a person fleeing an environmental disaster be considered a refugee? What is the definition of an

environmental refugee? Who is responsible for deciding which migrants are refugees and which are simply seeking a better life? Is there a difference between a person entering America because she cannot find work in her home country (an economic migrant) and a person who fears returning to her home country because rising sea levels threaten her ability to live and work in her home country (an environmental refugee)? Can the 1951 Refugee Convention be expanded to include environmental refugees? Recently, a professor at the United Nations University (UNU) suggested that the General Assembly needs to forge a new convention to deal with the many refugee situations that are emerging due to climate change. [http://www.enn.com/top\\_stories/article/6582](http://www.enn.com/top_stories/article/6582) Finally, who should deal with the care of these migrants? Certainly, a country that receives a large number of migrants cannot be expected to provide care for each migrant. Is it the job of the UNHCR to provide care for migrants as well as refugees? Another recent article gathers the comments of experts from NGOs and outlines the challenges of caring for future migrants. [http://www.enn.com/top\\_stories/article/6770](http://www.enn.com/top_stories/article/6770)

Refugee issues have been an important focus of the UN ever since it was founded, and member states have sustained high levels of commitment to these issues. These past experiences will serve as important examples to member states as they determine how to deal with the growing issue of human migration.

### **Statement of the Issues**

Based on this background, I think several topics could be written.

They are all very closely related, but perhaps one is stated more clearly than the others. It is important to write the issue in such a way that delegates will be inspired to write resolutions on the topic.

1. Defining the Status and Rights of Environmental Refugees.
2. Towards a Convention on the Status of Environmental Refugees.
3. Formulating a Relief Plan for Environmental Disasters caused by Climate Change.
4. Developing an Emergency Management Plan for Stranded Environmental Migrants.

### **Sources:**

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